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Are Bloggers Journalists?

On the rise of Amateur Journalism and the need for a Blogging Code of Ethics

by John Hiler

Sometimes a blog is just a blog.

But sometimes it's not, and the line between weblogs and journalism begins to blur. Just the other day, I was talking to a "real journalist": a friend of mine who freelances for the Economist and Red Herring. I explained to him what I was doing with Microcontent News, writing articles about weblogs and personal publishing.

Then I made the mistake of referring to what I was doing as an example of "online journalism".

"Wait, how can that be real journalism?" he interrupted. "You're totally biased because you work in the industry. A lot of journalists don't even register with a political party so they can write about politics objectively!" And that was just the beginning of my crimes against journalism: "You don't even have an editor, so none of your articles are even peer-reviewed!"

My friend had a point: real journalists benefit greatly from objectivity and peer-review. But weblogs are powerful for exactly the opposite reasons: they allow opinionated bloggers to post to the web without an editor. Depending on your point of view, this lack of objectivity and peer-review is either weblogs' greatest strength or their greatest weakness.

Nowhere is this conflict more in evidence than in the world of Journalism. As weblogs start to break stories and deliver analysis from industry insiders, they're coming up against many of the same conflicts that Journalists addressed years ago with their famous **Code of Ethics**. It's a catch-22: if all bloggers followed the Journalism Code of Ethics, their blogs would be objective and edited... but would they still be blogs?

Or put another way: can blogs contribute responsibly to the world of journalism, if they don't follow the Journalism Code of Ethics? And if the Journalism Code of Ethics isn't relevant to weblogs, is there a Blogging Code of Ethics that is?

MICROCONTENT NEWS AND ME

There are very real issues for me.

I started *Microcontent News* to cover the weblog beat because I'm passionate about weblogs and personal publishing and I saw the terrible coverage of blogs in the mainstream press and had to do something. Since I've started publishing my thoughts to the web, I've felt like I've been able to *do* something about how the press covers my industry.

And personal publishing *is* my industry: my day job is running a software consulting firm that focuses on helping businesses update their websites. I know this stuff better than the average journalist does because it's what I do for a living.

AMATEUR JOURNALISM

As you can imagine, this new form of amateur journalism brings with it a whole host of pros and cons.

On the plus side, amateur journalists bring real passion, deep domain knowledge, and excellent industry contacts to the table.

But then of course, there's the inevitable negative: The Agenda. I don't get paid to write my articles so I can't claim the objectivity that a paid journalist can. And, as we've already discussed, I don't generally have peer-review - and there's no Blogging Code of Ethics governing my actions.

SCRIPTING NEWS

One person who understands this intimately is Dave Winer, editor of **Scripting News** and **Dave Net**. Dave has been an **Amateur Journalist** for some time now, covering the weblog and technology sector on his sites. That makes a lot of sense to me, because the weblog and tech sectors are in the sweet spot for amateur journalists: emerging fields filled with jargon that often confuse mainstream journalists. Covering these fields is one place where amateurs are more likely to get it right than the professionals.

But as we've seen, amateur journalists often have agendas of their own. Every time I read Scripting News, I have to remind myself that Dave isn't a professional journalist: he runs a software company of his own and is actively involved in debates around web standards.

So like all of us Amateur Journalists, Dave has an agenda... but I don't mind. I'd rather read a biased story from someone who understands technology than an unbiased story from someone who doesn't. After all, you can always filter out bias... but it's impossible to filter out misinformation

A PERSONAL LESSON IN JOURNALISM

But Amateur Journalism is more than just understanding someone's agenda.

I learned this lesson the hard way in one of my first articles as a Amateur Journalist. I wrote a piece about a phenomenon called **Google Bombing** that weblogs could use to drive traffic to their sites.

The "**Google Bombing**" name was coined as a joke by Adam Mathes, a long time net citizen with multiple weblogs and webzines to his credit. When I wrote my article, I thought about possibly changing the name, as it seemed a bit dramatic, particularly in light of recent events. But in the end, I couldn't come up with anything better and comforted myself by writing what I felt was a fair and balanced piece.

Ten days later the BBC picked up the Google Bomb story with a screaming headline:

Google hit by link bombers

The BBC story stripped down the story to 499 words, forcing them to leave out all of my subtle points and qualifiers. To make matters worse, they added a color picture of journalist Danny Pearl in captivity, exacerbating the hysterical tone of the piece.

As **Doc Searls** put it:

[W]hat is that iconic picture of the late Daniel Pearl in handcuffs doing in this story? We don't learn until the second paragraph from the end that some folks "bombed" Google to "highlight the plight" of Pearl. But somebody just glancing at the story (Hmm.. Something about Google and bombing...) would never draw that conclusion.

I really felt awful about what had happened. I'd written a 2700 word article that I felt was balanced and fair... and my piece had been cut down by 80% and recast in the worst possible light.

For the first time in my short career as an Amateur Journalist, I realized on a gut level the responsibility involved in being a journalist. Sure, I've read about the sanctity of Journalism's "public trust" before... but it never really hit home like it did this time. Traditional Journalists wrestle with this responsibility every day but somehow it had never occurred to me that my articles might be read outside of the weblog community.

TAKE TWO

I tried to keep that sense of responsibility in mind when I started covering the Google/Scientology story on Microcontent News (parts **1**, **2**, and **3**).

At first, I tried to write the pieces in the usual casual voice of an Amateur Journalist. I used the first person, started the

article with a personal story, and shared my opinions on the subject.

But somehow the usual *Microcontent News* approach wasn't working. This wasn't my usual analysis of some aspect of weblogs: this was honest-to-goodness breaking news. If I was going to do more than just blog my outrage over what was happening, I had to do real original reporting.

In other words, I had to become a journalist for a day.

Once I realized this, I turned to Google for guidance... and found it in the **Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists**.

Their advice for me really helped me navigate the murky waters of breaking news:

- **Diligently seek out subjects** of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- **Identify sources whenever feasible.** The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
 - Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- **Support the open exchange of views**, even views they find repugnant.

I had never had to deal with these issues before, because I had never done original reporting. All of my articles had been about my thoughts and analyses on personal publishing.

But now I was writing articles that had very little to do with my beloved weblogs and for the first time I didn't have any agenda to look out for. Someone even emailed me after I published the piece, letting me know that I had "committed an act of journalism!"

It wasn't until I wrote my first piece as a Traditional Journalist that I realized how much easier Journalist life can be in a world of black and white. The Journalism Code of Ethics had given me a degree of clarity and guidance that I now craved.

JOURNALIST CODE OF ETHICS

I started looking more into these Codes of Ethics, hoping to find some clues to help me become a better Amateur Journalist. It quickly became clear that just about every national and regional newspaper has **their own Code of Ethics** helping their journalists decide what's ethical or not:

- **Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics**
- **Associated Press Managing Editors Code of Ethics**
- **Radio-Television News Directors Association Code of Ethics**
- **American Society of Newspaper Editors Statement of Principles**

So what do all these code of ethics say? The AP Code has a good overview that echoes the themes from many of the other Codes:

The good newspaper is fair, accurate, honest, responsible, independent and decent. Truth is its guiding principle.

It avoids practices that would conflict with the ability to report and present news in a fair, accurate and unbiased manner.

It even goes on to provide detail on four key attributes of good journalism (Responsibility, Accuracy, Integrity, and

Independence). Personally, I prefer the **shorter and pithier version**, courtesy of Jack Fuller of the Chicago Tribune:

"The journalist is someone who must tell the truth while providing information necessary for a self-governing people"

But it's not truth at any costs: it has to be tempered with other elements of the Code, such as accuracy. This is why most traditional journalists deride the **Drudge Report** as pseudo-journalism: Drudge is less concerned with accuracy than traditional publications, placing his publication firmly outside of any of the Journalism Code of Ethics I read online.

I was as conflicted as ever: I relate to Drudge more than I do to the New York Times. But at the same time, there's something comforting about the moral clarity of the Journalism Code of Ethics.

I couldn't help but think: if the journalism code of ethics isn't relevant for me, then what is?

FIRST PRINCIPLES

To answer that question, I started to dig into the first principles behind the Journalists' Code. You read enough of these things, and one word start to hit you over the head.

That words is "trust".

As a rule, we place a tremendous amount of trust in our news organizations. When I pick up the New York Times, I trust it to give me the news straight: unbiased, objective, and entirely edited. **Some** may disagree with me but overall that's exactly what I get.

Without that trust the New York Times wouldn't have any reputation as a news organization and would quickly go out of business.

TRUST AND AMATEUR JOURNALISM

It became clear to me that any Code of Ethics for Amateur Journalism had to take advantage of the best aspects of both Weblogs and Traditional Journalism.

- Weblogs are inherently biased and unedited. This is a strength, not a weakness.
- Journalism is built on a foundation of trust. This assumption underlies any Journalism Code of Ethics, for Amateur or Professional Journalists alike.

With that in mind, I started to draft a Code of Ethics that I could actually use:

A Proposed Blogging Code of Ethics

1. Amateur Journalists are inherently biased. What's crucial is not pure objectivity, but full disclosure. It is the responsibility of Amateur Journalists to fully disclose their agenda and background somewhere on their site. If a particular aspect of their background is especially relevant to a particular subject, that bias should be highlighted in any article on that subject.

2. Caveats are critical online. Accuracy is still important, but sometimes it's OK to print information that you haven't confirmed with multiple sources. Just make sure that you label it as such. Never ever publish information that you know not to be true. And if there's any doubt as to the accuracy of the information, caveat it clearly so that it's clear.

3. Blogging doesn't magically make you immune from Libel and Slander. If your article isn't clearly marked as

opinion, you should give the subject of your piece a chance to respond in print. This means dropping them an email or picking up the phone.

I haven't finished mapping out the specific rules of the Blogging Code, but the guiding principle is clear: Blogging, like Journalism, is all about creating trust between you and the reader. I hope to refine the document over the next few months, turning this *Blogging Code of Ethics* into a living, breathing document.

TRUST ONLINE

If you're an Amateur Journalist, you'd better start worrying about your reputation.

That's increasingly true online, even for professional journalists. As **more journalists** have started weblogs over the last year or two, I've started moving my trust from the publication to the journalist.

- I don't read the New York Times, I read **David Gallagher**
- I don't read the Seattle Times, I read **Paul Andrews**
- I don't read the Mercury News, I read **Dan Gillmor**

I'm developing relationships with journalists that I never knew about before. And if the journalist keeps a weblog, that relationship is deeper and more intense than it's ever been before.

TRUST AND THE PROFESSIONAL JOURNALIST

This migration of trust is having an important impact on professional journalists.

If you work for the New York Times, you can't just depend on your editor to safeguard your reputation. You've got to protect it yourself. The cost of getting the facts wrong have gone up in this post-weblog world. After all, blogs are the world's best fact-checker: they will pounce on any error and tear your reputation to shreds. I'd never heard of **Alex Beam** before but I'm less likely to trust his writing after **75 bloggers tore his latest column about weblogs to shreds**.

TRUST AND THE AMATEUR JOURNALIST

For bloggers, it's all about trust too: except weblogs are starting from zero, building their reputations from the ground up. Blog responsibly, and you'll build a reputation for being a trusted news source. Don't, and you won't have a reputation to worry about.

It wasn't until I was knee-deep in Amateur Journalism that I started to see how a seemingly crusty old Journalism Code of Ethics could be relevant to a blogger like me. But once I moved past the letter of the Code and got into the spirit of it, I realized that the Code of Ethics was more relevant than ever. The fundamental principle of trust between reader and writer holds equally true for journalist and blogger alike.

Whether you're reporting a story or blogging a link, you have to earn your trust the same way: one reader at a time.

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